

A FISH OUT OF WATER?

What on earth is serious actor Kevin Kline doing in a John Cleese comedy?

WHAT'S Kevin Kline doing sniffing ladies' boots, swallowing pet fish and stuffing chips up someone's nostrils?

After all, the American actor, dubbed Errol Flynn's successor by the U.S. press, has hardly cultivated a reputation for being a deranged eccentric on screen.

He was the clean-cut jogger in *The Big Chill*, a laid-back misfit in *Silverado* and an upright anti-apartheid campaigner in *Cry Freedom*. The closest he got to playing an off-the-rails character was as

the psychotic lover in *Sophie's Choice*. But he was John Cleese's first choice for the part of psychopath Otto West in the box-office sensation *A Fish Called Wanda*.

Otto, a macho martial-arts maniac, prides himself on being an intellectual, but invariably gets his facts wrong. He thinks Buddhism means every man for himself and the London Underground is a political movement.

"John wanted to write something for me that was more attuned to the energy he saw in *Sophie's Choice*,"

explains Kevin, looking remarkably like swashbuckler Flynn with his sliver of a moustache and long, wavy hair, streaked with grey.

"He wasn't interested in the work I did in *Silverado* and *The Big Chill*. He wanted me to play something extreme. He said he wanted me to make Dennis Hopper's performance in *Blue Velvet* look restrained."

And if that sounds like a tall order, John wanted

6 He wanted me to make Dennis Hopper's performance in *Blue Velvet* look restrained 9

41-year-old Kevin to be funny, too. Although he had done farce and restoration comedy on stage before, *A Fish Called Wanda* was his first foray into celluloid slapstick.

His performance as Otto has since been hailed a "a major comic triumph" by British critics. In fact, John, who plays bashful barrister Archie Leach, is the surprising straightman among a batch of unexpected comedians, including Hollywood star Jamie Lee Curtis.

The association between John and Kevin goes back five years. They met in Sydney, where the American was promoting *Sophie's Choice* and the Englishman *Privates On Parade*.

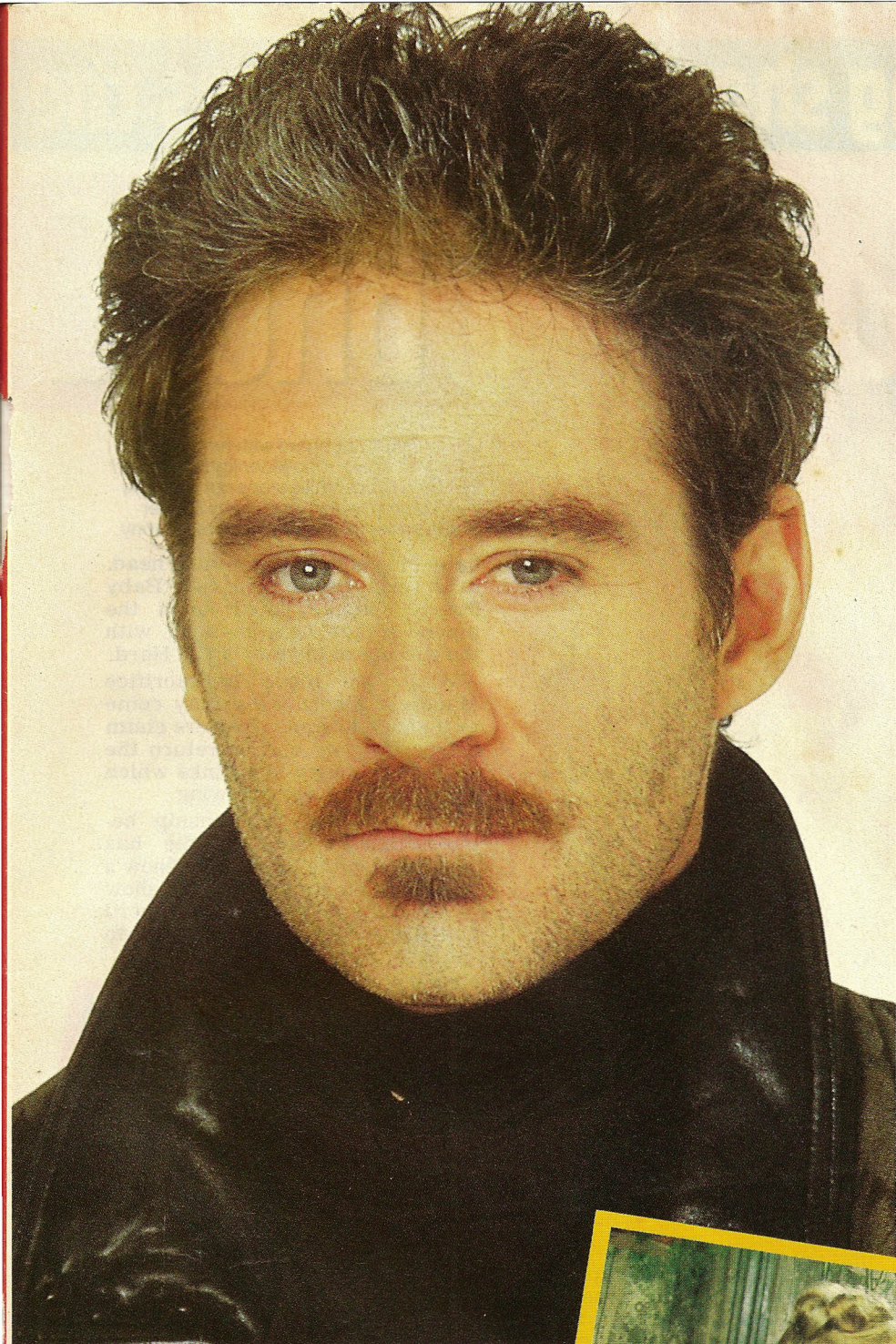
"Michael Shamberg, who produced *Wanda*, knew that John was a fan of mine from *Sophie's Choice* and that I was a huge John Cleese fan, so he arranged this dinner in Sydney," Kevin recalls.

Two years later, the actors teamed up in *Silverado* and cemented their friendship. There was never any doubt that they would work together on John's pet project *Wanda*, and specifically on creating Otto's odd persona.

They even jetted off to Jamaica early last year to thrash out the character, with John performing the rest of the roles while Kevin cavorted as Otto.

"John was trying to get a cheap vacation out of it but, of course, the sun never shone and it rained the





boot and spontaneously started whipping himself with it.

"John said why don't you sniff it because you've been sniffing your armpits," he says. "I said that sounds really sick. So I sniffed it and realised the boot deflated and that I could re-inflate it. I got this whole bellows thing going!"

In another of Kevin's sick scenes, he swallows a shoal of goldfish, including the tank beauty, Wanda. He reluctantly admits that, yes, they were stunt fish.

"They were rubber. I chewed on rubber fish, and then I did a thing I used to do as a child with brussels sprouts. It looks as if you're eating them, but you put them to one side of your mouth.

"People told me they found that scene completely repulsive, which is what it is meant to be. So was the scene when I stuff chips up Michael Palin's nostrils. You can hear the audience gasp and gag."

Kevin says John, an essentially serious man, also tends to reserve his manic moments for film.

"I wouldn't claim to know all of John. He is a very complicated person. He has an ironical and offbeat appreciation of the world. He is a very serious and probing intellectual, who is interested in psychology and philosophy."

But John's professionalism and seriousness didn't stop him creating a fun atmosphere on the set.

"He fined you a pound if you weren't having fun. He insisted that it be fun," Kevin says.

Kevin lives in New York's Upper West Side with actress Phoebe Cates. He wears a Russian wedding ring on his wedding finger, but isn't yet married.

"It is a distinct possibility in the not too distant future," he admits.

*From Anne Branagan
in London*

RIGHT: The closest Kevin Kline came to playing a psycho before *A Fish Called Wanda* was in *Sophie's Choice*, which co-starred Meryl Streep.

whole time, so we got some work done," says Kevin, with a mischievous twinkle.

Seriously, though, he found working with the former Monty Python and *Fawlty Towers* star an edifying experience. Their comic sensibilities meshed so well that they either came up with the same ideas or complemented each other's.

While rehearsing a bizarre seduction scene with Wanda (Jamie Lee Curtis), Kevin pulled off her

